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ABSTRACT

This lesson introduces students to one of the most admired characterizations in Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales," the Wife of Bath. Students read Chaucer's description of the Wife in the "General Prologue" to consider how he represents her, both as the poet of "The Canterbury Tales" and as a character in his own poem, then read the "Wife of Bath's Prologue," where he has her speak for herself, to gain additional perspective on her character. Next, students investigate some of the literary sources that Chaucer drew upon as he created this portrait of a woman with her own ideas about matrimony, and examine evidence about marriage in the Middle Ages and the role that women played in medieval society. Finally, students read the "Wife of Bath's Tale" and explore the alternative readings of the tale in relation to the character of the Wife of Bath. The lesson plan also contains the subject areas covered in the lesson, time required to complete the lesson, the skills used in the lesson, the grade level (8-12), and lists of the standards developed by professional or government associations that are related to the lesson, as well as activities to extend the lesson. (RS)

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Chaucer's Wife of Bath

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Lesson Plans

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Introduction

This lesson introduces students to one of the most admired characterizations in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales,* the Wife of Bath. Students read Chaucer's description of the Wife in the "General Prologue" to consider how he represents her, both as the poet of *The Canterbury Tales* and as a character in his own poem, then read the "Wife of Bath's Prologue," where he has her speak for herself, to gain additional perspective on her character. Next, students investigate some of the literary sources that Chaucer drew upon as he created this portrait of a woman with her own ideas about matrimony, and examine evidence about marriage in the Middle Ages and the role that women played in medieval society. Finally, students read the "Wife of Bath's Tale" and explore the alternative readings of the tale in relation to the character of the Wife of Bath.

Learning Objectives

(1) To analyze Chaucer's portrayal of the Wife of Bath in *The Canterbury Tales;* (2) To consider how the story told by the Wife of Bath reflects on both her character and on Chaucer's view of marriage and women; (3) To examine literary sources that contributed to this characterization; (4) To explore the historical context that informs this depiction of the rights of women in marriage.

Lesson Plan

Literature: British

Literature: Poetry

8-12

One to two class periods

reading literary texts
critical analysis
literary interpretation
primary source analysis
historical analysis and interpretation
critical thinking
Internet skills

NCTE/IRA List of Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of

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1 Begin by providing a brief introduction to Geoffrey Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*. For background, visit the **Geoffrey Chaucer Website** on EDSITEment, which includes a "Life of Chaucer" (click "Varia" on the website's homepage, then click Life of Chaucer) and extensive notes on *The Canterbury Tales* (click "Canterbury Tales" on the website's homepage, then select The General Prologue for notes explaining how Chaucer sets the scene and lays out the framework for his poem.)

2 Explain to students that love and marriage are recurring themes in *The Canterbury Tales,* and that the Wife of Bath, for whom marriage is almost a profession, is the pilgrim with the most to say on this topic. Have students read the description of the Wife of Bath in the "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales* (lines 444-476). Texts in Middle English and in modern English are both available through EDSITEment at the **Geoffrey Chaucer Website**. Click "Varia" at the website's homepage, then select "Other Interesting Chaucer and Middle English Web Sites"; under the heading "Other Chaucer Courses on the Web," click "Edwin Duncan at Towson, Chaucer," then select The Canterbury Tales (in Middle English) or The Canterbury Tales (in Modern Translation).

- Remind students that, like all the portraits in the "General Prologue," this description reflects on the narrator that Chaucer created for his poem -- sometimes called Chaucer the Pilgrim -- as much as on the character of the Wife. Point out, for example, the narrator's opinion of the Wife's cloth-making ability (lines 446-447) and his estimate of her kerchiefs (lines 453-454). How does this tendency to exaggerate affect our impression of the narrator? Point out also his summary of her married life (lines 459-462). How should we interpret the narrator's suggestion here that quantity is a mark of quality, that the Wife's worth as a woman can be measured by the number of husbands she has had? Finally, note those lines that seem to imply that the Wife has had extramarital affairs as well (lines 461, 467, 476). Are these sly turns of phrase intended by the narrator, or does Chaucer seem at points like these to be having his narrator reveal more than he means to?
- Have students offer a general impression of the Wife of Bath, based on her portrait in the "General Prologue." What can we infer about her personality, for example, from her domineering manner in church (lines 449-452), her world travels on pilgrimage (lines 463-467), and her social skills (lines 474-476). Note that Chaucer devotes many lines to her costume. Does she seem fashionable? over-dressed? Have students compare their mental image of the Wife of Bath with the near-contemporary picture found in the Elsmere Manuscript, accessible through EDSITEment at the

the cultures of the United States and the world; (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience. (more)
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (more)
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiencees for a variety of purposes. (more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)

National Council for the Social Studies

1. Culture (more)
2. Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
4. Individual Development and Identity (more)
5. Individuals, Groups, and Institutions (more)

Geoffrey Chaucer Website (click "Canterbury Tales" at the website's homepage, then select The Wife of Bath's Prologue).

- Conclude this close reading by asking students to summarize what the narrator seems to think of the Wife of Bath. Is she admirable? ridiculous? attractive? repulsive? Have students explore the notion that we see her in a dual perspective, both social and moral. How would one judge her by the standards of her society? How does she measure up to moral standards?

3 Turn next to the "Wife of Bath's Prologue," where she takes on medieval antifeminism and tells the story of her own much-married life. For background, see the introduction to the Wife's "Prologue" at the **Geoffrey Chaucer Website**. (Click "Canterbury Tales" at the website's homepage, then click The Wife of Bath's Prologue.) Use the links on this page to introduce students to Chaucer's sources for the Wife's "Prologue."

- As a character, the Wife stands in a literary tradition of "old bawds" that goes back to classical times, but her most direct ancestor is La Vielle in the *Romance of the Rose,* a 12th-century French poem that Chaucer translated. Chaucer borrowed some lines from La Vielle's long speech for "The Wife of Bath's Prologue," along with some of the enthusiasm La Vielle expresses in her advice for taking advantage of men.
- In her defense of marriage, the Wife takes aim at a long tradition of antifeminism that can be traced to St. Jerome's *Against Jovinianus,* which argues the virtues of celibacy and portrays marriage as a necessary evil. Chaucer has the Wife quote Jerome and some of the Scriptures he cites, as well as a passage that Jerome translated from *The Golden Book on Marriage* by the ancient Greek philosopher, Theophrastus.
- In addition to Jerome, the Wife's "Prologue" refers to many other antifeminist authorities, and cites many examples of the corrupting influence of women, all of which, the Wife says, were collected by her fifth husband, the clerk Jankyn, into a single volume that he called his "book of wykked wyves" (line 685). This is a fictitious book invented by Chaucer to make the Wife's erudition on this topic more plausible.
- After students have become familiar with these literary sources, have them read the "Wife of Bath's Prologue" and outline her argument on marriage. How does she refute the view that marriage is less virtuous than celibacy? What is the basis for her claim that wives should have authority over their husbands in marriage? How does she argue against her third husband's antifeminist accusations? How does this compare with the tactics she uses against her fifth husband, Jankyn? What do her frank sexuality and love of life add to the force of her argument?
- Most critics agree that the Wife of Bath is Chaucer's most vivid and realistic creation, yet at the same time she is the character perhaps most thoroughly constructed from literary sources. In the Wife's "Prologue," Chaucer even calls these sources to his readers' attention. Discuss with students how this combination of "real life" with literary allusion affects our response to the Wife of Bath. To what extent might one say, for example, that Chaucer has "created a monster," bringing the antifeminist tradition to life? To what extent

National Standards for Arts Education

Visual Arts

4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures (more)
6. Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines (more)

View your state's standards

might one say, on the contrary, that Chaucer's character refutes that tradition with her irrepressible vitality? Note that the Wife opens her "Prologue" by claiming that "experience" is a better guide to truth than learned "authorities." Are there indications that Chaucer shares this belief? Has he assembled all the authorities cited in the "Prologue" in order to demonstrate their shortcomings? Or does the Wife expose her own moral deficiencies in her effort to dismiss them? In short, is the Wife an object of satire in her "Prologue" or an instrument of satire -- or somehow both at the same time?

4 To place Chaucer's work in historical context, have students work in groups to prepare class reports on the institution of marriage in medieval times and the place of women in medieval society. In addition to library resources, background on these topics is available through EDSITEment at the **Labyrinth** website and the **Geoffrey Chaucer Website**.

- For a wide selection of reports on medieval marriage and the place of women in medieval society, go to the **Labyrinth** homepage, click "Pedagogical Resources," then select "Women Writers of the Middle Ages (Bonnie Duncan)"; scroll down to the heading "Secondary Hypertexts Written by Students at Millersville University" and click Domestic Life.
- A rare look inside a medieval marriage is available in the *Paston Letters,* the correspondence of a wealthy Norfolk family covering the years 1425 to 1486. Many letters in this collection were written by the Paston women and reveal both how they accepted the authority of the men in their family and how they exercised authority over the family in the men's absence. There is also a short letter (Letter 13, To William Paston, 1440) describing a medieval "courtship," which in this case involved bringing the woman selected for matrimony to meet the Paston's son, and an example of a marriage contract (Letter 27, Draft Indenture of Marriage Settlement, 1454), which spells out what the Pastons had to "pay" to secure a husband for their daughter. For an electronic text of the *Paston Letters,* click "Middle English" under the heading "The Labyrinth Library" on the **Labyrinth** website's homepage, then scroll down to the heading "Paston Family" and click TOC to view the table of contents. (Note: This electronic text is a transcription of the letters in the original Middle English.)
- For a look at the roles women played in medieval society, click "Varia" on the **Geoffrey Chaucer Website** homepage, then select "Other Interesting Chaucer and Middle English Web Sites"; under the heading "Other Chaucer Courses on the Web," click "Edwin Duncan at Towson, Chaucer," then under the heading "Other On-Line Research Aids," click "Medieval Life" and select Domination and Dominion of the Gentle Sex: The Lives of Medieval Women. Here students can tour The City of Women or follow the Sister Cities link to explore other Internet resources on this topic.
- After students have presented their reports, discuss how this historical context throws additional light on the fictional Wife of Bath. For example, remind students that medieval marriage was a largely financial arrangement, involving a transfer of wealth from the bride's family to the groom. Does this fact make the Wife's account of her own marriages seem improbable? Likewise, there is evidence that medieval

law held wives in subordination to their husband. Does this evidence make her arguments against academic authorities seem somewhat beside the point? Should we view her not as a free-thinker but as an outlaw? Finally, what of love? In medieval times, love seems to have had little place in marriage. How should this fact influence our response to the Wife's frequent emphasis on sexual appeal as a driving force in her relationships? Have students debate the following question: to what extent should an informed reading of the "Wife of Bath's Prologue" and an informed response to her character be based on historical evidence of the attitudes toward marriage and women held by Chaucer's contemporaries? Is Chaucer holding her up to ridicule? Or does he use her to ridicule the conventions of his own age? Or again, does he somehow manage to set her in both perspectives at the same time?

5 Turn finally to the "Wife of Bath's Tale," which unexpectedly, perhaps, is not one of the bawdy stories for which Chaucer is famous but is instead an Arthurian romance based on a plot device familiar in fairy tales like "The Frog Prince" -- the transformation of an ugly mate. For background on her tale, click "Canterbury Tales" on the **Geoffrey Chaucer Website** homepage, then click The Wife of Bath's Tale.

- After students have read the Wife's tale, consider first what might have led Chaucer to give her this story to tell. Explain that throughout *The Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer generally gives his pilgrims tales that fit their character. Thus the Knight, who is the noblest member of the group, recites a chivalric romance, while the Miller, who is one of the commoners, tells a bawdy tale. In other cases, Chaucer creates a dramatic motivation for his pilgrims' choice of tales, as when the Friar's insulting tale of a summoner prompts the Summoner to tell an insulting tale about a friar. To what extent does the Wife's tale seem appropriate to her character as it has been depicted? Does the tale reveal new or unexpected aspects of her character? Does it illuminate any of the very different relationships that she has experienced in marriage? The moral of the story seems to confirm her argument in the "Prologue," that wives should have authority over their husbands, but the proof of the moral seems to come through magic. How does this reflect on the Wife's character? Does Chaucer in this way represent the Wife as seeing herself as the "loathly lady" waiting for some loving husband to unlock the beauty inside her?
- Students may notice that the hag of the story seems to sound like the Wife of Bath when she lectures her unwilling husband on "gentilesse" (lines 1106-1212), the innate worthiness attributed to those of noble birth. Have students explain the hag's argument here: that true "gentilesse" is a quality of character, not a result of noble birth. To what extent does this argument confirm the moral order of medieval life, which placed spiritual values above worldly ones? To what extent does it undermine the medieval belief in natural hierarchy, which saw a feudal pattern governing all things? Note that the hag's argument cannot change her loathly appearance. That occurs when her husband refuses the choice between inner truth and outer beauty by giving the governance in their marriage to her. In doing so, does he reject the concept of a natural hierarchy, which gives men authority over women, and place his faith instead in a

spiritual order? Or does he "say the magic words" in the fairy tale tradition?

- Conclude this lesson by having students explore these alternative readings of the tale in relation to the character of the Wife of Bath. How does the tale's seeming endorsement of spiritual values reflect on the Wife's very worldly arguments based in experience? How does the tale's climactic scene, in which the husband's submission to his wife is also an act of faith, reflect on the Wife's lessons in winning authority in marriage? Are the Wife's "Prologue" and "Tale" somehow two sides of the same coin, or contrasting treatments of a single theme? What can we infer about Chaucer's view of the Wife of Bath from the tale he has given her?

Extending the Lesson

Though held in submission by social convention, some women gained a measure of authority in the Middle Ages by becoming authors. Encourage students to explore women's writing in the medieval period by visiting the **Geoffrey Chaucer Website** on EDSITEment for links to the works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kemp, two mystic writers, and to the work of an anonymous woman poet whose best work, "The Flower and the Leaf," was for centuries attributed to Chaucer himself. (To access these texts, click "Life and Manners" on the website's homepage, then click Women in Chaucer.) For additional information on medieval women writers, click Medieval Women on the **Labyrinth** website homepage.